

# Youth Employment



## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, unemployment rates around the world have risen, but no group has faced more problems in this area than young people. In 2009, the UN estimated that there were approximately 81 million unemployed young people in the world. With approximately 85% of the world's youth population living in **developing nations**<sup>1</sup>, opportunities are often rare for them to try and improve their situations. The current rate of youth unemployment is over three times higher than that of adult unemployment<sup>i</sup>. If these young people grow into adulthood, never having had

opportunities for work both to help themselves and their communities, the cycle of global poverty will not only continue, but get worse as fewer people are able to support their families and fewer countries are able to develop their economies.<sup>ii</sup>

“The United Nations, for statistical purposes, defines ‘youth’, as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, without prejudice to other definitions by Member States. This definition was made during preparations for the International Youth Year (1985), and endorsed by the General Assembly (see A/36/215 and resolution 36/28, 1981).”

- UN Social Policy  
and Development Division



Tea Stand Attendant in Indore, India  
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Over the next ten years, the current generation of over one billion young people will enter into the labor market around the world, expecting to find work. Those young people that have been able to find jobs often work for less than US \$2 a day<sup>iii</sup>. This is not just a problem for developing nations. Even in developed countries, youth unemployment rates are hitting never before seen highs. In the United Kingdom, over 20% of people between 16 and 25 are unemployed<sup>iv</sup>.

One of the key parts of the **United Nations Millennium Development Goals**<sup>2</sup> is to “achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people”<sup>v</sup>.

**Developing Nation:** A nation where the average income is much lower than in industrial nations, where the economy relies on a few export crops, and where farming is conducted by primitive methods. In many developing nations, population growth threatens the supply of food.

**Millennium Development Goals:** Eight broad goals set for every nation on the planet at the Millennium Summit in 2000 to improve life for people across the globe

Because of this, the Secretary-General and the General Assembly have made youth employment one of their top priorities. In fighting youth unemployment, the UN has three basic strategies:

1. Creating programs to ensure that all young people are given a good basic education;
2. Encouraging and helping to introduce national programs that are limited in time and scope, meaning that countries work within their **means**<sup>3</sup> and set target dates for meeting their goals;
3. Encouraging governments to make and follow policies that control youth working conditions, as young people often work in dangerous situations for very low pay.

## HISTORY OF THE ISSUE

Young people have, throughout recent history, been victims of conflicts and problems very often outside of their control. For example, the international economic **sanctions**<sup>4</sup> on Iran have left many people jobless, but youths make up more than 70% of that group<sup>vi</sup>. How to handle young workers has posed a problem for governments for a very long time, and solutions to economic crises have always come with attempts to lower the rate of youth unemployment.<sup>vii</sup>

### YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

During the Great Depression in the United States in the 1930s, President Franklin Roosevelt implemented policies in his “New Deal” specially aimed at combating youth unemployment, creating multiple programs offering aid and **incentives**<sup>5</sup> to men between 18 and 25. With these and other similar policies, President Roosevelt was able to lead the United States out of the worst economic crisis in its history.

The *Youth Business Sri Lanka* program (YBSL) was implemented in 1997. While mainly designed to keep young men from rebelling against the government, the YBSL established credit and business support programs for young people, allowing them to start their own businesses. YBSL and other programs like it were largely successful in reducing the number of unemployed young people around the world.



A young worker in a bicycle shop in Turkey  
© UNDP

## The International Labour Organization (ILO)

**Mean:** Available resources, especially money

**Sanction:** Actions, usually having to do with trade, that one or several countries take in order to try to force another country to change its policies ex. Making trade with that nation illegal, refusing to send aid, etc.

**Incentive:** Rewards given for following certain guidelines or recommendations

The International Labour Organization (ILO), founded in 1919, has sought to end child labor and secure the basic rights of young workers throughout its nearly century long history. In 1959, the ILO adopted the *Resolution concerning the Problems of Young Workers*, which called for considerations on

1. Create programs to help young workers, using the ILO's knowledge,
2. Create a group of experts to meet, discuss, and study young workers' issues,
3. Expand the ILO to better help fix problems faced by young workers.

The scope and complexity of the ILO's projects have been increasing ever since. It launched initiatives like the World Employment Programme and the Jobs and Skills Programme for Africa which helped to set up institutions and **infrastructure**<sup>6</sup> that reduced the problem of youth unemployment. After the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, the ILO created a new body specifically to handle issues of youth unemployment, the Youth Unemployment Network (YEN)<sup>viii</sup>.



Demonstrators in the United Kingdom

© Aleksandrs Ivanov

Since 2000, nearly every country across the globe has started programs targeting youth unemployment including widespread efforts in Asia, South America, Eastern Europe, and sub-Saharan Africa, and most were improving, if only in small amounts, until 2007. After the recent global economic crisis, however, youth unemployment rates in many nations began to climb again, and governments are having a hard time keeping up.<sup>ix</sup>

## YOUTH EMPLOYMENT AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

In 2000, the United Nations hosted the largest gathering of heads of state in world history known as the Millennium Summit. They set down eight main goals and many smaller ones for world development to ideally be met by 2015, one of which was to “develop and implement strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work”<sup>x</sup>. In the time between the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000 and 2007, most regions in the developing world saw improvement in both youth employment rates and employment in general.

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**Infrastructure:** Aspects of everyday life that a government provides, such as roads, hospitals, water, sanitation services, etc.

### The Youth Employment Network (YEN)

The YEN is a **non-governmental organization**<sup>7</sup> (NGO) under the International Labour Organization that was founded in 2001 in order to “**mobilize**<sup>8</sup> action on the commitment of the Millennium Summit for decent and productive work for young people”<sup>xi</sup>. It currently has a network connecting 18 developing nations and has helped in many larger regional youth employment projects. Its past and current projects include helping youths share ideas through international **networking**<sup>9</sup>, providing incentives to the **private sector**<sup>10</sup>, especially in Africa, to employ more young people, doing surveys and studies on youth employment rates in order to keep the UN and ILO up to date on current statistics, and helping to train young professionals who otherwise would not have the opportunity to get a job or a higher education<sup>xiii</sup>.

**Unemployment** means more than just people who do not have jobs. In order to calculate the unemployment rate in a country, region, or in the world, you need to know the total number of people who are either working or looking for a job (this is called the “Labor Force”) and the number of people who are currently unemployed, meaning that they are looking for work but cannot find it. You divide the number of unemployed people by the total labor force, and then multiply by 100, and you get a percentage. This is the unemployment rate.

As of today, YEN has helped young people around the world take major steps forward in regards to their rights as a part of the labor force. In 2009 it reformed the system under which countries team up to improve the lives of young workers, creating the modern Lead Country Network, at the same time donating over 10 million US dollars for various youth employment initiatives in the countries involved<sup>xiii</sup>. It also puts out a great deal of information in the form of international studies and surveys on the issue, and has trained more than 1,500 young people across the globe to help improve the lives of their peers by starting up their own smaller networks to end youth unemployment<sup>xiv</sup>.

### Fulfilling the Millennium Development Goals

Now that the global economic crisis has put a number of nations farther behind on their development goals than they were four years ago, many countries’ unemployment rates for young people have dropped to record lows, and the proportion of people living on US \$1.25 or less a day increased substantially in many regions<sup>xv</sup>. The MDGs are facing some significant obstacles, but

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**Non-Governmental Organization:** An organization that operates independently from any government ex. Amnesty International, Medecins Sans Frontieres

**Mobilize:** To become assembled, organized, or ready for an action

**Networking:** A supportive system of sharing information and/or services among individuals and groups with a common interest

**Private Sector:** The area of a nation’s economy owned and operated by private citizens, not controlled by the government



meeting the goals by the target date is possible with strong domestic leadership and international support for countries that need it.

## DISCUSSION OF THE PROBLEM

When dealing with issues of youth employment, one must examine three equally important parts of the larger problem:

1. The rising rate of unemployment among young people around the world. There are over 81 million people between the ages of 15 and 25 that are currently looking for work but unable to find it;
2. High levels of underemployment among young people, meaning that many people who have graduated from college or been trained to do skilled labor are unable to find work on the level for which they are qualified and must instead work lower wage jobs that do not use the skills which they have gained;
3. The rights of young workers, which are often abused and ignored in developing nations, where, because of their more vulnerable position in society, young people are often forced into working for unfair pay in dangerous conditions for extremely long hours.

Despite the best efforts of international initiatives like the Youth Employment Network, the global financial crisis has had a huge impact on youth employment around the world. Between 2008 and 2009, youth unemployment rates rose more than in any previous year, reaching 13%<sup>xvi</sup>. The United Nations considers youth employment one of its top priorities for young people, ranking it just behind education but still ahead of issues like hunger and poverty, according to the World Programme of Action for Youth. Almost 85%, close to one billion people, of the entire world's youth population lives in developing nations, and within that group there are approximately 57 million young men and 96 million young women who do not know how to read<sup>xvii</sup>. With statistics like that, it becomes obvious that high unemployment rates are not the only issue. Even if jobs are available, without further development of education systems, youth can remain stuck in low paying and often hazardous jobs like working on farms, with heavy machinery in factories, and for far more than reasonable daily hours in **sweatshops**<sup>11</sup>, offering little opportunity for improvement and a bleak vision of the future.

## PROBLEMS THAT YOUNG WORKERS FACE

Because of their more vulnerable status in society, young people who can find work are often forced into doing dangerous and demeaning work for much less than a **livable wage**<sup>12</sup> and for hours that would be considered entirely unfair for an adult to be working. As a result, young workers tend to live in poverty more often than their adult counterparts. In 2008, more than 152 million youth workers were living with their families on less than US \$1.25 a day. That's more than 28% of all young workers in the world<sup>xviii</sup>. In order to address these issues, the UN has tried to focus not just

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**Sweatshop:** A place employing workers at low wages, for long hours, and under poor conditions

**Livable Wage:** An amount of money that allows the worker to live without being in poverty

on youth employment, but on “decent employment.” The International Labour Organization says that decent work “sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives...aspirations regarding opportunity and income, rights and recognition, family stability and personal development, fairness and gender equality”<sup>xix</sup>. In other words, it is not enough just to create jobs for youth, but rather the UN hopes to see a world where young people are paid fairly, treated well, and given the opportunities necessary for a better future.



Mural by Street artist Banksy  
© The Grenadian Voice

Young women face their own set of problems when it comes to employment. The youth unemployment rate for young women is about 13.2%, compared to about 12.9% for young men<sup>xx</sup>. While that might not seem like a large difference, when you take into account the youth labor force for the entire world, it means that there are about 3.3 million more unemployed young women than men.

Difficulties finding work as a youth can create problems that last throughout a person’s life. Without prior work experience, job prospects as an adult can be limited, and a young person may not learn the skills required to move into the work force later in life. This can be true of

everyone from young business entrepreneurs in Japan to a young person operating a family run vegetable stand in Algeria. Without stable and decent employment, young people can become a burden on their families and, on a larger scale, on the economies of their nations. Without hope that they might someday be able to work, tension and frustration can build and the restless generation of unemployed young people can cause problems in their communities.<sup>xxi</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES OF YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

While the direct consequences of high rates of youth unemployment may seem obvious (idle workers, problems developing the national economy, little opportunity for personal development), there are more indirect results that can be harder to see, but are equally as challenging.

### Youth Unemployment and Civil Unrest

When there are high rates of youth unemployment, especially in non-democratic countries, there is a high risk of protests and **civil unrest**<sup>13</sup>. While there are many different reasons behind the protests and revolutions currently happening in the Middle East and North Africa, youth unemployment is a common thread throughout them all. The rate of youth unemployment in Tunisia, the first Arab country to overthrow its **dictator**<sup>14</sup>, was 30% at the beginning of 2011. Egypt, where the revolutionary spirit came next, had a rate of 25%. Lebanon, which has seen some

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**Civil Unrest:** A public disturbance caused by a group of people, usually a form of protest against a government or policy  
**Dictator:** A person with absolute power over a government or state

demonstrations as well, has a youth unemployment rate of about 21%<sup>xxii</sup>. These statistics are not limited to the developing world. The rate of youth unemployment in the United Kingdom is

currently about 20%, and in Spain the rate recently reached over 40%<sup>xxiii</sup>. All of these countries are facing economic and social hardships, and half a generation of frustrated, unemployed, underemployed, and underprivileged youths are asking their leaders for answers but often hearing nothing in reply.



### Youth Unemployment and Armed Violence

Many try to make the case that youth unemployment leads to armed violence, especially in places like sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. The truth behind this situation is slightly more complicated. While it is true that many of the people (almost entirely young men) who are driven to lives of armed violence against their government or against other armed groups were unemployed, their unemployment is not the cause of their frustration. Rather, they are most often

frustrated with the corrupt, unjust, and outdated **sociopolitical**<sup>15</sup> systems that have **marginalized**<sup>16</sup> young people from society<sup>xxiv</sup>. While job creation initiatives by the UN, Intergovernmental Organizations, and Non-Governmental Organizations have been relatively successful in decreasing armed violence, it must be understood that there are deeper underlying issues that must also be addressed.

## PROGRESS AND PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

In the last few decades, almost every member nation of the UN has implemented some kind of policy attempting to deal with issues of youth employment. There are millions of young people entering the labor force every year, and creating jobs for them is an essential step to creating wealthier economies, fairer societies, and stronger democracies<sup>xxv</sup>. The UN must also work not just towards making jobs available to young people, but towards improving the quality of work and defending the rights of young workers so that they might improve their living conditions and actively participate in society both at home and in the global community<sup>xxvi</sup>.

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**Sociopolitical:** The combination or interaction of social and political factors

**Marginalize:** To place in a position of limited importance, influence, or power

Youth employment is not an issue that can be handled with a single solution by the General Assembly or UNICEF. Solutions vary with regional, national, and individual circumstances and must allow for basic but wide-reaching plans that promote economic development on all these levels<sup>xxvii</sup>. As the UN continues to search for solutions to this problem, it should keep in mind that the best path to improving opportunities for young people is one that aims for higher quality education and gender equality and allows for **vocational**<sup>17</sup> training.

### CASE STUDY: GHANA

Ghana is a West African nation of about 25 million people with a quickly increasing population. Gold mining and agriculture make up the majority of its industry, employing more than 50% of the country's workers<sup>1</sup>. While unemployment is high for everyone, young people have an especially hard time finding work, and with nearly 40% of the population under the age of 14<sup>1</sup>, Ghana's youth employment problems will continue into the future unless major action is taken.<sup>1</sup>

The Ghanaian government defines a young person as anyone between the ages of 18 and 35, and estimates show that this group makes up about 26% of the population<sup>1</sup>. As Ghana's population grows, as many as 250,000 new workers enter the labor force each year, but Ghana's underdeveloped economy only allows about 5,000 of them (about 2%) to find work<sup>1</sup>, leaving hundreds of thousands unemployed. With a growing youth population, Ghana has the potential to develop its economy and become a major force in Africa and the world, but it currently lacks the infrastructure necessary to do this.

Ghana is concerned over the potential risk to national security posed by high youth unemployment rates. They connect the high rates of crime and gang memberships to the high rates of youth unemployment, and also believe that if there were more formal private sector jobs available there would be less "black market" or informal economic activity<sup>1</sup>.

Ghana recently established the National Youth Policy (NYP), a wide-reaching series of reforms to youth employment and the role of young people in society, saying "The youth constitute the true wealth and future of our country. Addressing their hopes and aspirations must be an integral part of our socioeconomic development efforts"<sup>1</sup>. The NYP established a framework upon which strategies for economic development for young people can be built. It also details the rights and responsibilities both of young workers and their adult employers.

## PAST INTERNATIONAL ACTIONS

Being addressed in the Millennium Development Goals makes youth employment one of the UN's top priorities. The Millennium Summit was the single largest gathering of heads of state in world

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**Vocational:** Instruction or guidance in an occupation



history, and together they decided that youth employment was an issue worth tackling in the first MDG, the overall aim of which is to eradicate poverty and hunger. In 2005, the ILO adopted a resolution that set down policy recommendations and frameworks for governments and corporations to help them combat high youth unemployment rates in their countries and bring about change<sup>xxviii</sup>.

Since the founding of YEN in 2001, the organization has worked to “build international **consensus**<sup>18</sup> and influence the international agenda through a comprehensive strategy for employment and **social inclusion**<sup>19</sup> of young people”<sup>xxix</sup>. Through initiatives like the Lead Country Network, YEN brings countries from across the globe together to share ideas and implement like-minded and mutually beneficial policies. The Lead Country Network provides four main services to its member nations:

1. Technical assistance in the development of youth employment programs;
2. Knowledge-building on how to engage youth in national youth employment programs;
3. Support fund-raising strategies for youth employment programs;
4. Access to experiences and good practices from other countries<sup>xxx</sup>.

Other UN bodies like the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) have partnered with the ILO and other groups to promote opportunities for young people. The General Assembly has also adopted multiple resolutions on the topic such as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)’s resolution 2006/15, which encourages governments to work together to find a solution to issues facing young workers.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What sort of programs/policies can governments implement within their own countries to improve youth employment rates?
2. Why is it that young people tend to do worse than adults in times of economic crisis or hardship?
3. Is it enough for young people to simply have jobs? Does having a job guarantee that a young person will be successful and productive? What are some ways that the UN can continue to improve the situations of young workers after they have found work?

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**Consensus:** Agreement

**Social Inclusion:** The provision of certain rights to all individuals and groups in society such as health care, education, employment, etc.

## BLOC POSITIONS

### THE UNITED STATES AND WESTERN EUROPE

Youth unemployment is not a problem only affecting the developing world. The European Union's average youth unemployment rate in May of 2011 was over 20%, with some nations reaching levels as high as 35% in Greece and 40% in Spain<sup>xxxix</sup>. The United States faces similar problems. 21% of young men and 17% of young women there are unemployed<sup>xxxix</sup>, and only 53% of college graduates from the classes of 2006-2010 are employed full time<sup>xxxix</sup>.

### LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Latin American youths were hit particularly hard by the global economic crisis. Youth unemployment rates jumped to 13.4% on average in 2008 and to 18.5% in 2009<sup>xxxix</sup>. The true rates may be even higher, as many Latin American youths have simply given up looking for work, and they would not be factored into the unemployment rate. Mexico's economy shrunk by 6.5% in 2009<sup>xxxix</sup>, taking potential jobs away from young people, and over 700,000 Mexican students dropped out of school in that same year<sup>xxxix</sup>, demonstrating just how little hope for the future employment in this part of the world.

### THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

While the complaints that led to the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and have now spread across the Middle East and North Africa are deeper than a desire for work. The poor economic conditions for young people in these countries have been major motivators in the current revolutions happening across the region. Both of the countries that have removed their dictators thus far had high rates of youth unemployment (Tunisia: 30%, Egypt: 25%<sup>xxxix</sup>), and the same is true of many of the countries currently facing political and social unrest. Tunisia and Egypt serve as examples of what youth unemployment can lead to if it and the larger economic and political problems behind it are not addressed by those in power.

### SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Few places suffer more from youth employment issues than sub-Saharan Africa. Without the strong infrastructures necessary to deal with it, governments have a hard time tackling the issue of youth unemployment. Employment overall has been generally improving in the last few years, rising to a new high of 65% of the total population in 2008 and holding steady there<sup>xxxix</sup>, but 60% of unemployed people in sub-Saharan Africa are youths, and those that do have work tend to be in dangerous conditions, often working for less than two dollars a day<sup>xxxix</sup>.

## INDIA AND CENTRAL ASIA

While India's unemployment rates have been decreasing, young people again bear a larger burden than adults. Youth unemployment rates have been increasing in the past few decades, and have settled around 8% in the past few years<sup>xl</sup>. The conditions in which young people work in this part of the world are often dangerous, and few governments in the region have serious regulations protecting the rights and interests of young workers.<sup>xli</sup>



## EAST ASIA

36 million young people in East Asia are unemployed<sup>xlii</sup>, a record high and a surprising number given the strong economic growth in China and her wealthier neighbors. About 56% percent of the world's youth labor force lives in this region<sup>xliii</sup>, so its governments must put a special priority on helping them to find opportunities and contribute to the global economy. East Asia has of the worst youth to adult employment ratio in the world, with there being approximately five unemployed young people for every one unemployed adult<sup>xliv</sup>. Many countries in this part of the world also have issues regarding workers' rights.

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